

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. An image distribution apparatus comprising:  
a dial-up communication unit which carries out digital communication with one or more clients through a telephone network;

an Internet communication unit which carries out digital communication with one or more clients through the Internet;

an interface for image input which at least receives a moving image signal picked up by image pickup means attached to a medical device;

an image encoding unit which encodes the moving image signal to a digitized image signal at one or more preset data rates in real time; and

an image distribution unit which distributes at least one digitized image signal at one or more of the data rates to the one or more clients through the telephone network or the Internet.

2. The image distribution apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising:

voice input means for inputting a voice signal;

voice grade selecting means for selecting a voice grade for encoding;

a voice encoding unit which encodes the voice signal inputted by the voice input means to a digitized voice signal at a data rate conforming to the voice grade selected by the voice grade selecting means; and

a voice distribution unit which distributes the digitized voice signal to the one or more clients through the telephone network or the Internet.

3. The image distribution apparatus according to claim 1,

wherein the interface for image input receives plural moving image signals,

the image encoding unit encodes each of the plural moving image signals to a digitized image signal, and

the image distribution unit distributes all or a part of the plural digitized image signals to the one or more clients.

4. The image distribution apparatus according to claim 3, wherein the image distribution unit distributes only an image signal selected from among the plural image signals in accordance with an image selecting signal from the client.

5. The image distribution apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising:

a data rate memory unit which presotres plural sets of data rate groups consisted of one or more of the data rates; and

data rate setting means for setting the data rates of the digitized image signal by selecting from the plural stored sets of the data rate groups; and

wherein the image encoding unit encodes the image signal to the digitized image signal at all the rates

included in the selected data rate group.

6. The image distribution apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising:

an interface for measurement signal input which receives a measurement signal indicating a value of a vital sign including at least one selected from temperature, blood pressure, pulses, the number of breaths, and oxygen saturation in blood;

a measurement signal encoding unit which encodes the measurement signal to a digitized measurement signal in real time; and

a measurement signal distribution unit which distributes the digitized measurement signal to the one or more clients through the telephone network or the Internet.

7. The image distribution apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising:

patient identifying data input means, connected with a patient information database, for inputting patient identifying data identifying a patient to be picked up by the image pickup means; and

a data distribution unit which searches patient data corresponding to the patient identifying data through the patient information database when the patient identifying data are inputted by the patient identifying data input means, and which distributes all or a part of the patient data to the one or more clients through

the telephone network or the Internet.

8. The image distribution apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the medical device includes a surgical microscope.

9. The image distribution apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the medical device includes a slit lamp.

10. An image distribution apparatus comprising:  
a communication unit which carries out digital communication with one or more clients through a telephone network or the Internet;

a dial-up communication unit which carries out digital communication with one or more clients through a telephone network;

an Internet communication unit which carries out digital communication with one or more clients through the Internet;

an interface for image input which at least receives a moving image signal picked up by image pickup means attached to a medical device;

an image encoding unit which encodes the moving image signal to a digitized image signal at one or more preset data rates in real time; and

an image distribution unit which distributes at least one digitized image signal at one or more of the data rates to the one or more clients through the telephone network or the Internet.